

VIKING'S PRECISION WOULD BE HEAVEN ON EARTH

At the End of a Politician's Rainbow: Mars

BY ZEV YAROSLAVSKY

Somehow, I knew the scientists out at Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena would find a way to make Viking's scoop start working again. Success, in my view, was assured—and that bothers me.

I've been following America's space efforts since 1962 and, as a politician, it now behooves me to make a confession: That was the year I played hooky from school to watch John Glenn's epic flight in Friendship 7. Later on I gave up a date to hear Frank Borman read Genesis from lunar orbit. And I forfeited a day's pay to watch the first moon landing in 1969.

So, when I got up at 5:15 to get the earliest word on the Mars landing, it was not the only time I'd sacrificed valued sleep to participate, however vicariously, in America's space program. For the past week, I've been going out of my way to catch every TV screening of Mars pictures, and now I eagerly await word of what the biological tests reveal about the possibility of life on the Red Planet.

Unlike most people in city government, I have more than a passing interest in science. Having been graduated from high school with that as my major, I entered UCLA with the idea of becoming a mathematician. Somewhere along the line, however, I abandoned the realm of the absolute and came down to earth—into politics.

In short, something went wrong with my career, or something went right—it's hard to tell. Not being able to calculate which is exactly the kind of thing that bothers me about Viking.

I envy the astrophysicist who deals in an environment where everything is ultimately predictable, where the variables are known

or knowable, where all problems can be solved with formula or equation.

How marvelous to be able to judge success or failure as easily as do the men at JPL: Either Viking sends back a signal, or it doesn't. Either the scoop scoops, or it doesn't. Either life exists on Mars in some form, or it doesn't.

The laws of physics and astronomy always apply. Velocity has no ego. Acceleration has no bias. Gravity has no political ax. It's ironic that, 212 million miles away, we have complete control, primarily because, given the absolutes of nature, we have no control at all.

Life on earth, of course, is exactly the opposite. Every aspect of social activity is subject to interpretation. Facts bend with the prevailing winds. History is revised. Statistics

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are manipulated for popular consumption. Society moves in one direction—and then another. A politician takes a stand, only to change it two, four, six years later. There are no precisely definable rights or wrongs.

In the past two years, I've seen tens of thousands of pages written in support of rapid transit for Los Angeles County; I've seen an equal number explaining why it will bomb. Caltrans says the Diamond Lane project is working; other experts say it isn't. Congress tells the President that unemployment is too high; *he* tells Congress that employing the unemployed is inflationary.

Who is right? Who is wrong?

The federal government spends billions to feed the poor, clean the air, solve energy-supply problems. We devise projects to employ those on fixed incomes, help motherless chil-

dren, fight crimes. Yet, in the end, we have no formula which tells us whether we've succeeded.

The scientist knows that his realm is made up of constants that will apply tomorrow as well as today. But the rest of us must face up to human imperfection, which leaves us with no constants and no absolutes. Our lives are consistently inconsistent and predictably unpredictable.

In short, human society requires us all to live lives of utmost flexibility—the antithesis to Viking's world of split-second precision and perfection. Where the astronomer's job is to apply the right numbers to his formula, I must grapple to find the formula in the first place.

So Viking's success on Mars has simultaneously comforted and troubled me. It's pleasant to have a glimpse at a word of precision, a world without conflict or misconception—where one measures success or failure by whether something works or doesn't. I only wish we earthlings had it so good (or so bad, according to how you look at it).

But I don't want to give the impression that I'm glossing over the most conspicuous failure of the Viking Lander: its jammed seismic detector. I do have an explanation: Basically, there's nothing wrong with the device—it's been properly designed, it's technically perfect. But, since man's hands have touched the seismometer, the blame—if such there be—must lie with "human error."

But, you say, man's hands have touched all parts of the spacecraft, so how could I have been so sure the folks at JPL would fix the scoop? If, as every schoolboy knows, a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, then my own inconsistency merely shows that I'm human, too.